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What about Me? An Examination of Identity Formation Among Beginning Educators

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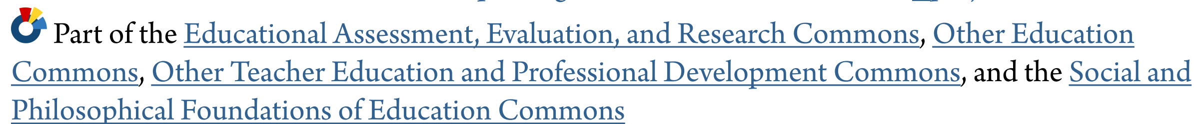
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What about Me?

An Examination of Identity Formation among Beginning Educators

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An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for Honors
In
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The Feinstein School of Education and Human Development
Rhode Island College
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What about Me?

Even when I was young, I struggled to try to figure out what is "right." I thought that if I could figure that out everything else in life would be easy. No decision would ever be difficult again; I would just have to do the right thing. At first, it was fairly easy—do not take things that do not belong to you; share your toys; do not hurt people, etc. The rules were so hard and fast, so choosing the right thing was usually a fairly simple process.

As I got older though, the choices became less clear. The questions got more complex and my response options multiplied. No longer could I easily discern the "good" answers from the "bad" ones. Every action had a consequence for somebody, and at times none of them seemed to be appropriate. Still, I pushed onward in my pursuit of the right way, and in the process, I tested out many different roles. My identity, whatever that was, needed to be the "right" one.

Over the past decade, I have been an athlete, a stage manager, an actor, a parliament member, a treasurer, a resident assistant, a tour guide, a ballroom dancer, and very involved with music, participating in marching band throughout high school as well as my college wind ensemble. Of all those roles, the only one that has stuck is my most recent—teacher. I decided that I wanted to be a teacher in fourth grade, and I have grown to be very passionate about it. But even in that regard, the question "what is right?" continued to linger. What if I am not the right type of teacher? Does that even exist?

With those questions in mind, I pause the film *Dead Poet's Society* almost every time I watch the scene when Mr. Keating's students climb onto their desks and declare "Oh Captain, my Captain" in protest of their teacher's firing. Keating is such a likable character in the movie and many remember that famous scene. His character is beloved by many, in part because he was

able to profoundly change the lives of a group of young boys, but I admire him more because he was able to do so while knowing exactly who he was, regardless of who the school told him to be. He was so sure of what was right for him and what was right for his students—indicating a strong teacher identity. I pause each watching because I wonder: if I were in that situation, what would I do? Would I do what the school wants or be the teacher that I believe the students need?

Who am I? Who am I becoming?

About a year ago, I received an email from my school about a summer work opportunity. The position it described involved working with inner-city middle school students in a rigorous program that aimed to provide the means for marginalized kids to do well in school, go to college, and maybe even become teachers themselves. It seemed like something that I would love, so I decided to apply.

I began researching the organization's website, and I stumbled upon a sample curriculum. Now, because this was an afterschool program, they had a great deal more flexibility than schools traditionally would. Some of their courses included environmental justice and Harry Potter, but there was one class that stood out to me, entitled "Who am I? Who am I becoming?" It is an entirely appropriate class for a group of developing adolescents, but I could not help but wonder how well I would be able to teach such a class when I could not even answer the question myself. Right about then was when I really began the long formal process of trying to find the answer.

Who am I?

To be clear, I am *still* trying to answer that question. It is complex; it has no right answer, and the answer will change over time, but it is a vitally important. Each of the seven billion human beings on the planet has a unique lens through which they view the world. That lens

dictates what each person views as good, bad, beautiful, or trivial, and no two lenses show exactly the same picture. Within it are value sets, beliefs, experiences, hopes, and fears, all changing the way we perceive our surroundings. Consequently, acknowledging and owning that lens is crucial because it helps to uncover identity and understand how and why we live. For teachers, the lens dictates how they view teaching and its purpose, so it holds implications for students as well. In this way, it is because these lenses are so important and so unique that I feel it necessary to identify my own lens as a preservice teacher.

To begin with the basics, I am a son, brother, and student, currently working toward a degree in education at Rhode Island College. I am a tutor at my school's writing center; I like trying to get inside peoples' heads to watch how they think. I am also very passionate about everything that I do, and I seek justice for the people and the world around me. My identity has been affected by a great many things in my life thus far, but the three most profound for me as a teacher are my parents, my teachers, and my own school experience.

Parents.

I often hear that I am a spitting image of my parents, and I take pride in that. My mother, for example, is a caretaker at heart, and a stubborn one, too. Her mother died young, so she had to take on a lot of responsibility for her family, and she still does. She is so passionate and is unwilling to let people fail. My father, on the other hand, is probably the most even-tempered, likeable person that you could ever meet. He is patient, kind, and extremely driven, but, perhaps most importantly, he is understanding of others, even when he does not agree with their views. He understands that every belief system usually has a practical source. He may not always agree, but he respects it anyway.

It is also true, however, that I learned from them to be perfectionistic and stubborn, at times. I remember, many times, watching my dad work late into the night and even through the morning as I got ready for school to finish work presentations or employee evaluation write-ups. Over time, I learned that for several of those he probably could have finished earlier and at least gotten a few hours of sleep, but his drive to achieve perfection illegitimated that option.

My mom, too, can be that way, but it manifests differently in her. She directs that energy as a caretaker for others, and almost stubbornly so. She is scarily good at sensing when something is wrong or when people need something (she got a lot of practice with me, since I kept many problems private as an adolescent), which is a largely noble thing. However, that desire to be helpful sometimes overlapped with her stubbornness in a way that pushed her to get involved in situations that she did not need to be, sometimes at the expense of her own needs.

As I have grown, I have watched them, and I adopted many of their traits. Because of them, I have developed a heightened sensitivity to the needs of people and communities. I have learned to moderate, respectfully counter opinions, and play devil's advocate, while striving to remain neutral. I believe that these will serve me well in the classroom, and I don't intend on letting my students fail. My parents taught me so much about how to interact with others and how to live, but I learned the most about teaching by watching my teachers.

Teachers.

When I was in high school, I used to carry around a little blue notebook in which I would write down ideas for lessons, characteristics of teachers that I admired, and things that I did not like as a student. I had both amazing and unbelievably bad teachers throughout my educational experience; both impacted my educational lens. Some of my teachers just taught me algebra, but others taught me how to learn. Many pushed my limits, and a few showed me what not to do.

Some of the best, though, taught me know to live. I met the first of those teachers in fourth grade, and he was a large part of what inspired me to teach.

Mr. LaBelle was great for many reasons. He was creative in his lessons; he brought in couches and posters to help make our classroom comfortable; he was kind; and we could sense his passion. More than anything though, he treated us like real people, like adults, and formed real relationships with us. I was very fortunate; I was only nine years old when he taught me what teaching could be.

Some teachers may use school vacations to think about anything but classes, enjoying a much deserved break. Mr. LaBelle was not entirely different. He liked to spend his breaks on adventures. I remember him talking about his trips to the White Mountains and his excursions in Australia. Other times, he went skiing. Whatever the case, he always made it a point to take a break from his adventures, sit down, and write each of his students an individualized postcard.

Now, I cannot speak for my classmates, but that made me feel so important. He was also the first male teacher that I ever had, and his example served as an important model for the type of man that I wanted to become. He was not a stereotypical teacher, in that he did not just teach—though he did that quite well—he was also a role model and a mentor for his students, and he took great pride in their accomplishments. In this way, school was very important to the development of my identity, though it was not just because of teachers. I was also shaped a great deal through social interactions both inside the classroom and out.

Social/Academic Experiences.

Academically, I always did well in school, and with the exception of mathematics, I generally enjoyed my classes. However, for as long as I can remember, I felt somewhat different from my peers, not entirely dissimilar, but like a puzzle piece that needed to be forced to fit with

the ones around it. In the classroom, it was not so bad, but there were times when my teachers did not seem to understand what I was saying. I think abstractly. I often remember things in terms of other things by using analogies—not the most direct route, I admit, but it works for me.

My trouble came socially. While I did find a core group of friends when I reached high school, I had a lot of trouble before that. I remember feeling especially unlike other boys my age. As a high school freshman, I made the school's baseball team, but I learned very quickly that I did not enjoy many of the same things that my teammates did, and by the end of the season, I decided that I would not try out for the team again the following year. Finding a sense of belonging took a long time for me, and when I found it, I valued it more than anything.

With that said, I realize now that I owed these struggles, in part, to my tendency to "other" myself. This essentially meant that, at times, I distanced myself from people because I assumed that I was the only person to feel the way that I did. I wasn't like "them"; I was the abstract "other" type of person, whatever I thought that was. I know better now that such an assumption is misguided; I am inherently unique, and nobody is going to be exactly like me, but I certainly share quite a bit with my peers, and even the boys on that baseball team. I understand this better now, but knowing it when I was an adolescent would have been much more valuable.

Consequently, that experience carries implications for educators. While a less obvious responsibility, I believe that facilitating social development is also at the core of teaching and schooling. Adolescence and young adulthood are full of challenges. So, for teachers, it is important to both understand that and actively work to facilitate student interactions. Academics are very important, true, but even with a 4.0 GPA, students may have trouble in the real world if they cannot socialize and collaborate successfully with others.

Today.

Until this project, I had not taken much time to consider all these factors, but I now realize how crucial doing so is to understanding and being conscious of identity. All of the aforementioned shaped the person that I am today, and to help me gain a better sense of exactly who that person is, I did a lot of journaling and took a Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). After asking a series of questions, the test diagnosed me as an INFJ, which means that I have an introverted intuition, but I have extroverted feelings. It is the rarest personality type in the test, making up only about 1% of the population, and even within that females are more likely to be classified there than males—which may help explain a bit of why I felt so different from the boys around me. The results did not set me apart from peers, but it did help me to discern some differences. With this knowledge, though, also came more questions about the future…What does would all this mean for me as an educator?

Who am I Becoming?

Who I am becoming, specifically as a teacher, was the question that prompted this research. At the time, I felt like the person that I was becoming and the person that I wanted to become were somewhat at odds. My belief is that teaching should be grounded in existentialism, the idea that, because students are going to school so that they can be successful in life, teaching should be aimed at facilitating the growth of young adults in order for them to have the efficacy to make informed decisions when they need to and lead a happy life. Teaching the content is important, but it takes a back seat to helping students find a way to use that knowledge somewhere in the world that they live in.

Relatedly, I composed a journal on June 23, 2012 that reads, “Teaching can never be solely about creating good test scores or international superiority. Teaching is about preparing

young adults to exist in a world that is not always easy." Teaching, for me, is primarily about student agency. I wanted to become a teacher that can facilitate that agency, but, once again, I felt—or at least thought I felt—resistance to that. I felt that as a teacher my puzzle piece may still not fit right, and that concerned me.

What's the Issue?

My first attempt at an honors project actually was not about identity; it was really more about fear. After deciding that I wanted to compose an honors thesis, I researched and wrote a proposal to submit to the honors committee. The proposal centered on the idea that standardized testing, and even certain standards, hinder teacher agency. I did not believe that my philosophy of teaching or my professional goals would fit into the current culture of school reform and standardized tests. I feared that I may have to sacrifice my agency and my identity in order to assimilate, and if that happened, I wondered, would I even want to teach?

I decided that I wanted to teach when I was very young, and I am very passionate about it. I knew what I needed as a student, what my best teachers taught me, and the values that my family instilled in me. I knew that all I wanted to do was what was best for the students. If my actions did not seem to be in line with meeting that goal, then I could not consider myself to be successful. That possibility has been a very real fear for me as a preservice educator, and it showed in my first proposal.

That proposal failed to gain the approval of the honors committee. For several reasons, not excluding its creation of harsh binaries, the committee deferred judgment and asked me to resubmit a new one. It was frustrating at first. In the first place, I felt like I failed, and I do not like failure, but I also still genuinely believed in my reasons for writing the first proposal. Yet, in

that moment, I did not understand the gravity of the changes that I was about to make. That was when I began moving toward an identity self-study.

Why Do This Project?

It was still clear to me that I was concerned about finding my place in the profession, if there was even a place for me. This study was important because it provided me with a framework, within which I could work toward better understanding myself and the circumstances for teachers today. This study gave me the opportunity to get out into the field and see for myself what I would be up against while reflecting on my identity formation and studying the development of young teachers like me. Before the project, I was haunted by assumptions that I just would not fit it because I was "different," but my research forced me to stop making assumptions and start analyzing data. The results of this study have major implications for both me and my future students.

Literature Review

Identity Formation and Aspiring Teachers

When I was younger, I struggled to understand how people developed and what made them who they were, but I appreciated one scene from the Beatles inspired rock opera, *Across the Universe,* in which the main character, Max, argues with his uncle about some questionable life choices he recently made. "What you do defines who you are!" proclaims the aggravated uncle. To which his nephew responds, "No, Uncle Teddy, who you are defines what you do. Right, Jude?" Max wheels to his left waiting for his clearly surprised friend to corroborate his claim, but, instead, Jude tweaked the statement to form a response has resonated with me for years. "Well, surely it's not *what* you do," he said hesitantly, "but, uh… the way that you do it."

Everyone enters the world with the same hard-wiring, but none stay the same. Each grows into a unique person and forms a distinct identity that influences how they act.

James E. Marcia (1980) defines this identity as “an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” (p. 159). Yet, he warns that identity must not be assumed to be something that an individual is born with or even something that a person “has.” Instead, it is a structure that is developed over time and one that is gradually—and constantly—reshaping.

Marcia’s position is that, in most cases, this process follows an industry-identity-intimacy progression. This means that a person must develop a confidence in their ability to produce meaningful outcomes in a given field to create a compass for guiding their life’s work. Then, the individual needs to build a strong sense of self within that work in order to become intimate with it. Intimacy, however, requires vulnerability, and this is why a strong identity becomes so important. Forming that identity is not an entirely linear process; it forms and reforms over time, and requires people to commit to certain ideologies and career paths.

For some people, but specifically young adults, they may not form a solid identity or may develop only a partial one. Marcia argues that this is because “they cannot risk saying ‘no’ to elements of their past which they are certain and make the affirmative leap into an uncertain future” (p. 160). While the process is universal, this can be a particularly pressing concern among new teachers.

Judith K. Franzak’s (2002) article, *Developing a Teacher Identity: The Impact of Critical Friends Practice on the Student Teacher*, tells the story of Rebecca, a developing teacher with this dilemma. As she began her student teaching, she expressed concerns about entering the profession, saying, “As far as the big picture, I am afraid of ‘being’ a teacher. For a long time

I've been 'becoming' a teacher. I try to look five, ten years down the road and I can't see it . . . It's a big fear of mine that I'll burn out on teaching" (p. 273). This fear, especially common among new educators, seems to be grounded in the debate over what teaching is vs. what teaching "should be."

Understanding Teacher Identity

Brad Olsen (2010) argues that, on some level, this is a concern for all teachers as they construct their "teacher identity," a pedagogical lens of sorts through which teachers view the world, their life, and their teaching. This lens is constructed—and reconstructed—through experience both inside and outside the classroom. He continues to express that within this process there are four main stages of concern that new teachers must pass through: preservice concerns, survival concerns, teaching situation concerns, and finally student concerns.

In the first stage, new teachers are likely to worry about entering the classroom for the first time, as they believe doing so is "going over to the enemy," so they will have to resist authority structures. Here, befriending students is often among many teachers' most important goals. However, upon actually entering the classroom, the focus tends to shift toward survival concerns, where new teachers tend to work toward being liked by their colleagues, managing their classes, and avoiding major mistakes. Now, surviving the school day has become the main goal, not resisting authority. Then, survival concerns often leads into similar "teaching situation" concerns, where teachers have to master their non-instructional responsibilities, like working the copy-machine, learning school policies, and finding appropriate materials. While he regards that some of these stages may be experienced simultaneously or returned to, Olsen attests that the end goal is to reach the final stage, student concerns, where educators are finally able to focus on

their students' needs. Many teachers in this stage feel overwhelmed considering the needs of all of their students at once, and may tend to think that they deserve a better teacher.

However, sometimes teachers encounter obstacles as they progress through those stages. One example is a loss of autonomy in the classroom, which can eventually lead to teacher burnout or forfeited teacher identity. McBride, Yuhasz, and Mollineaux (1999) articulate it this way:

> …Time and time again we have heard from teachers we've worked with say that they have become "burned out" because they have no real freedom to do what most interests them. Time and again we have heard that teachers must teach "to the test." Time and again we have heard that students aren't "like they used to be," that they can't be controlled, and, worst of all, time and again we have heard from professional, experienced teachers that we are making a mistake [by entering the profession] (p. 22).

Aspiring educators are given a variety of tools as undergraduates that prepare them for their future educational undertakings. They are taught how students develop, how to accommodate differing learning styles, and how to use an array of instructional strategies; however, Olson (2010) argues that no amount of university instruction will be able to completely replace what an individual has cognitively constructed as "good teaching" through their experience as students.

Furthermore, factors like a teacher's family life, the neighborhood that they grew up in, quantity and age of classroom resources, salary, preservice educational experience, and media images can all have a profound effect on identity (Olsen, 2010; Franzak, 2002). Also, the process of teacher identity formation is not only affected by these experiences, but also by the way in which an individual interacts with them. It should be noted, though, that not all influences are

good; some even threaten identity development, and these are what seem to drive preservice teacher paranoia.

Challenges in Teacher Identity Formation

In 1999, 919 new teachers began their careers in Philadelphia, PA, but after only six years over 70% of those teachers had transferred to another district or left the profession altogether. This meant that, in a district with a student dropout rate of a high 42%, the teachers had a higher rate of attrition than the students did. This is an extreme example of the teacher turnover issue that is impacting schools across the nation, but Forbes contributor Erik Kain (2011) regards that, nationally, 46% of new teachers are leaving the profession within five years, a fact that costs the United States upwards of 7.3 billion dollars annually. For some preservice practitioners, this is becoming an important consideration, and experts have provided a few different viewpoints on the reasons for these new statistics.

B.J. Fraser's (1991) research, for example, indicates that school environment has an especially important role in ensuring healthy teacher identity development. If a new teacher is working in a supportive school environment where they have a reasonable amount of autonomy, there is more opportunity to affirm their goals and identity; yet, if the same teacher feels like their career aspirations are being threatened, their teacher identity is also at stake. This risk may be impacting teachers in a negative way.

Accordingly, many argue that modern American education runs on what Brad Olsen and Dena Sexton (2008) call "accountability culture." *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a document composed by President Reagan's administration professing the need for ensuring the accountability of schools and teachers through assessment and federal oversight, has been flagged by some as the driving force behind these contemporary reform movements. More

recently, Kara S. Finnegan and Betheny Gross describe these reforms as, “based on a theoretical assumption that consequences will motivate school staff to perform at higher levels and focus their attention on student outcomes,” (p. 594). Indeed, motivation did appear to rise, as “eighty percent of the teachers indicated that students spend more than 20% of their total instructional time practicing for end-of-grade tests,” (Gail Jones, et al., 1999) but this concurrently produced several consequences.

For teachers, anxiety comes with producing adequate test scores which pushes some educators to “teach to the test,” a process through which teachers forgo normal coursework in order to educate their classes about how to pass high stakes tests. In effect, one particular study attests, “teachers turn their attentions to test scores and away from their students and their sense of educational purposes,” (Rex & Nelson, 2004). Among educators, the negative consequences of mandatory high stakes examinations have come to be known as the washback effect (Newfields, 2005).

This accountability culture, in turn, stimulates a phenomenon called “threat rigidity” in school systems across the country (Olsen and Sexton, 2008). Threat rigidity is an established theoretical framework regarding the behavior of organizations. It explains that every organization is guided by both its stated goals and its desire for continued existence, but survival always takes precedence. Subsequently, when a school feels threatened, it tends to respond by centralizing control, tightening structures, emphasizing routinized and simplified instructional practices, and encouraging conformity among the faculty in order to avoid federal intervention. Thus, in some districts, threat rigidity creates teacher isolation.

Especially for new teachers, this often leads to a structure-agency debate, which grapples with the delicate balance between how much power the governing structure should get and how

much control individuals should be allotted. As Olsen (2010) puts it, teachers are expected to "follow orders, but be autonomous," (p. 11). This threat rigidity, however, ultimately "…decrease[s] individuals' perceptions of their value to the organization," (Olsen and Sexton, 2010, p. 15).

Relatedly, agency refers to "the capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation, and action," (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175) and this lack of agency, this loss of control, may bring a teacher's professional goals into question and pose a threat to identity formation. In his work on the impact of emotion and resistance in teacher-self development, Michalinos Zembylas (2003) provides a theory on the process of normalization. His stance attests that there are certain "emotional rules" that govern a teacher's actions within the school environment, and some teachers "need to regulate and control not only their overt habits and morals, but their inner emotions wishes, and anxieties," (p. 120) lest they wish to be seen as outrageous. Some educators may avoid exploring deviant identities altogether because they are rewarded for identifying with community norms. In this way, emotional repression leads to the development of a "normalized" identity.

He cites an example of a teacher named Catherine. In her high school science class, she prefers more progressive teaching models, but is pushed away from them by her colleagues. One of her peers questions, "Why do you want to be so different and not teach science the way it's supposed to be taught?" (p. 121). While "normality" is a fluid concept and changes in different contexts, for Catherine, this led to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and purposelessness.

Zembylas (2003) regards that this increased pressure to conform prompts some educators to, "foreclose" on their identities; they no longer question the administration, but merely follow orders in an attempt to avoid further marginalization. For other teachers, the pressure to produce

results becomes too much to bear and they move on to pursue other career options (Costigan III, 2002); this is especially true for new teachers, who often leave the profession within their first three years of teaching (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Teacher Identity Growth

Nevertheless, there are many experts that claim there are ways of combating identity foreclosure. While many teachers may latch onto the identity they had as teacher candidates, hoping to avoid forfeiting their professional goals, Olsen (2010) advises against adopting an all or nothing attitude. He says that effective teachers do not view, "the two approaches as mutually exclusive… [they] consider how to assemble a hybrid of both," (p. 64). This, he says, is essential, but can be emotionally taxing. As such, he advises joining like-minded groups of educators who can provide both emotional and political support.

Franzak (2002) agrees, stating that new teachers need mentors to help them to expand their imaginations, challenge assumptions about teaching, and provide support to combat their isolation. Therefore, she professes the importance of a "critical friends group"—or CFG—among these educators. CFGs are professional groups, generally made up of 10-12 other faculty members, where teachers can express concerns, ask questions, and provide constructive feedback with and to their peers.

Rebecca, who expressed a great deal of anxiety about teaching early on, found a sense of security, acceptance, and validation in the group, saying that it was much different than departmental meetings, where "factions" and "snide remarks" were common (Franzak, 2002, p. 271). She notes, "[The CFG] is something that gives me relief, because I think it's really a venue for teachers to support each other. After every meeting I felt relief and I felt charged up about what we are doing," (p. 723). It was this creation of a "safe space" within the reform driven

school climate that allowed Rebecca to build solidarity among her colleagues and combat the potentially negative effects of threat rigidity.

Furthermore, similar movements advise teachers to participate in communities that extend beyond one individual school, called professional learning communities (PLCs). In a way that echoes Lev Vygotsky's sentiments on social learning theory, PLCs create a means through which educators can collaborate as a profession to become better at what they do, combat isolation, and develop identity through what Terry Hayes (2007) calls "productive talk." This pedagogy encourages teachers to talk their way through professional issues, share ideas, and build solidarity. And while each of these teachers will have their own distinct identity, every PLC shares the common pursuit of good instruction. Some PLCs are becoming largely virtual through technological opportunities like blogs and wikis, but Hayes attests to the importance of maintaining face to face encounters with other professionals. These, he claims, "humanize the profession"—which can be invaluable to teachers battling the threat of identity foreclosure.

Olsen (2010) also advises teachers to choose their school site wisely, as he has seen teachers feel utterly miserable in one school, but thrive in another. Consequently, teachers should seek out schools that mesh well with their teaching philosophy. However, when this is not possible, others recommend that new educators refocus their efforts exclusively on what is best for the students and their learning. Rex and Nelson (2004), for instance, found one example in Stan, a new teacher who supports the goals of school reform but disagrees with the means. Despite his school's accountability culture, he quotes that his primary goal is to "teach the students how to become better people," (p. 1301). "He is finding sufficient evidence of the efficacy of his professional identity in his classroom," say Rex and Nelson. Consequently, his students provide validation for his identity, regardless of the socially challenging school climate.

Finally, Olsen and Sexton (2008) propose that teacher education programs must expose students to the current educational realities. If schools do, they say:

> [Students] will be prepared to interpret their professional contexts, interact with policy reforms, effectively resist (if they choose), successfully hybridize their practice (if they choose), and actively participate in school improvement deliberations. What this study has examined as threat rigidity might then be reframed by artful teachers and school administrators as transformation opportunity instead (p. 40).

Methodology

Throughout this study, I worked with the participating teachers to gather data and deconstruct their identity development. I surveyed them, interviewed them, and spent many hours observing and analyzing their work. Yet, this study was less about them than it was about me. As a preservice educator, I was concerned about the teacher that I may become and I wanted to find a way to manage my teacher identity in a way that allowed me to become an effective teacher for my students, one that helped them to learn the content in a meaningful way.

To meet these ends, it was necessary for me to utilize ideas from a few different theoretical frameworks, but because the central questions of this study were so inherently personal, all of them fell under the umbrella of self-study. Among my most important reasons for undertaking this project was to help me better understand myself and the teacher that I am becoming so that I can understand where I fit into the profession and traits that I may need to work on for my students. In this way, all of my research was guided with its implications for me in mind.

Many researchers cite self-study as especially important for teachers, as it provides them the opportunity to investigate their theoretical knowledge and work toward aligning that with

their practice. In this way, it trains a consciousness of a teacher's educational practice and helps to develop reflective practitioners (Loughran, 2007). Here, it provided a necessary and valuable framework for studying identity and its implications for my classroom practice.

In carrying out this self-study, I also employed concepts and methods from action research and phenomenology (Stringer, 2004) because doing so was essential to accurately defining the purpose of this project and meeting its ends. Action research requires the researcher to participate with others in working to solve some shared issue, and it differs from basic research in that it adds an extra step. Indeed, all researchers design, gather data, analyze it, and share their results with colleagues, but action researchers *use* their results to better their own practice (Stringer, 2004). Every piece of data that I collected in the field was used to help me understand and improve upon myself as a teacher. In this way, I was not just doing research; I was doing research that I could use.

Furthermore, Olsen (2010), whose research helped to frame much of my own, strongly emphasized the role personal experience in identity formation. For this reason, phenomenology also held relevance here because my researched focused on the experience, whether my participants' or my own, of becoming a teacher. Phenomenology is a practice rooted in careful examination of experiences and drawing meaning from them. So, in "becoming a teacher," I considered the implications of each participant's life in the classroom as a student and as a teacher.

This experience may be taken for granted without much thought given to causes or potential implications. In phenomenology, conversely, the phenomenon is constantly questioned and analyzed in an attempt to peel back the layers that comprise it (Stringer, 2004). Teachers do not just choose the profession arbitrarily; they enter the field for unique reasons and are, in turn,

shaped by the profession. Accordingly, the teacher identity formation process must be explicated so that the importance and meaning of the experience are not lost.

Every teacher has a unique conception of his or her teacher identity, and while everyone has an identity, it means something different to each individual. Every educator's subjective view of teaching and what "is right" will vary somewhat. This is a result of the impact of many experiences over a long period of time. Husserl (1976) argues the necessity of "peeling back the layers" to view these experiences more objectively, an imperative process in conscious teacher identity formation. In this way, a phenomenological study challenges the commonly taken for granted and demands meticulous investigation of every experience to find sources catalysts, and meaning.

Methods

Participant Selection and Observation

During my data gathering, I surveyed, interviewed, and observed the educational practices of two beginning teachers at a charter school in Rhode Island and kept a journal of my growth throughout the process. My first step was to contact The Rhode Island College (RIC) practicum coordinators to identify teachers who graduated from the school and found jobs within the three years prior. For the purposes of this study, "new teachers" were defined by having fewer than four years of experience in the field. I then contacted each via e-mail (Appendix A) and selected from the respondents. There was no compensation provided for participation, and all were required to fill out a consent form. In addition, I gained the approval of Rhode Island College's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to contact with any participants.

Recruitment, however, was a difficult process throughout this study, which eventually delayed my data collection. I initially contacted numerous participants from several schools

across the state, and in most cases even tried communicating with the school administration, but very few of my efforts yielded responses. More trying, though, was that out of the pool of respondents who did confirm their willingness to participate, seven effectively dropped out as they stopped responding to emails and phone calls.

Additionally, I encountered some resistance from administration. After the first seven participants dropped out of the study, I emailed an old classmate to see if he would be willing to participate. He agreed and also introduced me to a social studies teacher in his school who expressed interest. As a result, I contacted the school's directors to inform them about the research that I was conducting and ask for permission to work with their teachers. However, she responded via email stating that she would not allow me to work there without a full description of the study and that, if she let me do so, she would choose the teachers. Eventually, after both my advisor and I contacted her with more information, she agreed to choose two teachers for me to work with, one male and one female.

Subsequently, I assigned both participants—as well as all other names in this study—a pseudonym—Reed and Emily—and scheduled meetings with each at their facility, a public charter school located in the middle of a densely populated urban area with a large minority population. Reed is a 22-year-old, first year, seventh grade math teacher at the school and had only been teaching for a few months when I began working with him, while Emily, 25, is the school's eighth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher in the beginning of her second year.

I asked them to complete a professional values survey (Appendix B) and an educational challenges survey (Appendix C). The first was aimed at gaining a better understanding of the participants' educational philosophies, and the second provided information regarding the most trying challenges that each new teacher faced as he/she began working. Data from both surveys

was used to inform and guide additional questioning during the semi-structured interview (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006) (Appendix D) that was conducted later. These interviews had thirteen base questions divided into four categories—preservice experience, concerns, teaching experience and environment, and reflection—but follow-up questions were used in appropriate contexts. Each of these discussions was recorded and transcribed.

After the surveys were completed, an observation schedule was arranged with each participant, which allowed me to attend up to five classes per teacher. For both instructors, the observations helped reveal relationships between the data gathered through surveying and interviewing and actual classroom practices. Each visit had different foci including information regarding school environments, classroom dynamics, instructional tactics, and classroom management skills. Furthermore, using the preliminary data as a reference point, I watched for evidence of identity formation, threat rigidity, responses to it.

Self-Study

Meanwhile, my own development was tracked through regular journaling. The topics of these entries ranged, but each related in some way to the relationship between my identity and my concerns about becoming a teacher. My advisor helped immensely to focus my writing and my thinking here. For some entries, I studied my past experiences to discern what things had the greatest impact on the person, and teacher, I am becoming. Others focused, instead, on the sources of my fears. To help shed light on both, I completed a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) examination. While it is fairly easy for me to think in terms of the big picture, specificities can be a bit more difficult, and the MBTI was helpful in that sense. It asked specific questions about how I make choices and what I value, questions that I answered with teaching in mind. In that way, the results of the MBTI helped display the type of teacher that I would like to

be—my teaching temperament—which served as an important point of reference when considering how I may fit in the modern classroom.

Additionally, I used participant observation here because I am interested in understanding the experience of becoming a teacher, and this approach requires the researcher to pay close attention the experience that they are taking part in. Sparadley (1980) clarifies that ordinary participants differ from participant observers in that the ordinary will participate in an action without paying much attention as they do it; the action is often second nature. Participant observers, conversely, exist for the details. In teaching, and especially in regard to teacher identity, many educators are so busy that it is difficult to pay close attention to the relationship between their surroundings and themselves, but what is missed can be extremely important. Thus, as a participant observer, I am able to observe what is missed by becoming a part of that experience with them.

Analysis

I began my content analyses with a more holistic scan of all the data compiled for each participant individually, coding for themes and trends (e.g. were the responses on their professional values surveys consistent with what I saw during observations? Or, did concerns documented in the surveys and interview seem justified in the school environment?). Because of the study's phenomenological nature, the goal was to view both experiences and actions to see if there were connections between them, and if there were, consider the consequences that follow. Additionally, here, main themes and important events for each participant were coded for and then cross-examined to search for connections within the sample as a whole—between the participants and to me. These findings were then placed in the context of my research question: Do these experiences impact teacher identity and how they consider themselves as professionals?

Findings and Analysis

Because each person's identity and lens are shaped and reshaped over a lifetime, many of the questions that I asked my participants and the resulting themes that I found involve experiences in the past, present, and future respectively. Accordingly, my findings are organized in the same way. In doing so, my hope is that this structure will help to show how the past shapes the present, how the present shapes the future, and how important a consciousness of teacher identity is for new teachers.

Past

Why and How Should We Teach?

Why?

In the interviews, both Reed and Emily cited the ability to impact the lives of others, and maybe even change the world, as a main reason for becoming teachers, though their belief in the extent of their ability to do so varied. Reed was more confident, asserting "There's a lot of different things that you can do in the world, and there's very few careers where you can make such a significant impact on the world itself…I think that's the core fundamental of why I wanted to become a teacher." Emily did not disagree, but she says that she was initially skeptical and, until recently, did not understand the power that teachers can have. She told the story of a professor she had in college, recalling:

> …One day [he] just made this, kind of… almost like a throwaway comment…but he was like, "Well, I decided to become a teacher because I think that's the way that you change the world"…and I remember initially being like "Oh, come on…" like it was the cheesiest thing. It had never crossed my mind before… and then… I guess… I think it was maybe like…. just like a couple weeks after that comment that he had made that…

> you know… I guess sort of stuck with me . . . . I think I started to realize, like, how important it is… those, like, habits of thinking that you start to form at such a young age… you don't get to change any of that or have a hand in, like, shaping the way that people think about the world unless you're reaching them, like, in that process...

This excerpt retells a critical incident for Emily—the moment that she first began to think about the power of education. However, her word choice is also telling here. Her use of the phrases "throwaway comment," "I think," and "I guess" consistently in recounting her anecdote implies a hesitance and uncertainty in her statements and her beliefs. Thus, even though it is clear that Emily sees this as an important event in her life, I am not sure that she has viewed the experience critically enough to elucidate its meaning and impact on her.

In this respect, Reed seemed more certain than Emily about why he wanted to teach and what implications that could have for his students. She shared similar sentiments, but also added that she decided on the profession because it seemed like it would be fun and that it would pose a gratifying challenge for her. So, there was some consensus here, but for Emily it was a summation of many factors, while Reed focused more intensively on impacting his students.

How?

Nevertheless, despite sharing reasons for becoming teachers, there was a much more visible discrepancy in the discussions of educational purpose and the role of the teacher in the classroom. Both shared anecdotes that spoke to their experiences as students and the effect that those had on their teacher identity. On one side, Reed defines educational practice as focusing on "growing a person," which evidence from the classroom observations confirmed. He also extended his definition of teaching to roles outside the classroom, like mentoring and coaching.

Emily, rather, centers her teaching on guiding her students toward a mastery of the content and developing higher order thinking skills.

Content focus v. identity focus

In responding to a question about admirable traits in teachers, Reed put forth the notion that teaching extended beyond simply the content. Instead, he offered that educators, especially those teaching the middle grades, "[also] have to teach social interaction skills," and that "you're trying to overall just grow a person… just trying to get your piece of the puzzle so that you can grow a productive member of society." He even went as far as to say, "I'd be pretty ignorant if I came in here and was like 'My job is to teach math, and if you come up with anything else then that's extra'." To Reed, aiding each student's social, emotional, and identity development were not supplemental tasks, but were equally as important as the content.

These professional goals may have been acquired through Reed's own experience as a student. In recalling the most influential teachers in his life, Reed cited two of his college professors who had a profound impact on shaping the type of teacher that he wanted to be, saying:

> I was fortunate enough to have Dr. Baker and Dr. Angelou, um… who were both terrific… I feel like in their own way. Dr. Baker, I learned so much about, like, how to handle, um, middle school students… and like what's… not who they are, but like their identity . . . . whereas Dr. Angelou… I learned so much about, like, how to get the content from A to B, B being internalized in the student.

In addition, he mentions the importance of his coaching and mentoring experiences in regard to his teacher identity formation, proving an example of two inner-city minority boys that he mentored throughout his college years. Reed recalled one of the boys talking about his friends at

school and the fact that they all looked up to Lil Wayne, a popular rap artist. The boy, however, continued to say that he did not agree and that he did not think Lil Wayne was a good role model. Instead, he said to Reed, “You know who my role model is? My role model is you.” Reed explained the experience as life changing for both him and the boys, and took great pride in the impact that he had on them.

I was able to witness this commitment to growing his students and building relationships with them in the classroom. Reed told me that these relationships were important to him because they helped the students to understand his actions and why he may need to be strict occasionally. In one class, for example, two of his students were acting out, not paying attention during group work, and they knocked over Reed’s water bottle which spilled on the floor. At that moment, Reed separated them and sent each out of the room for a few minutes, but he also made sure to discuss the situation with them after class. He did so not as a punishment, but to calmly talk to them so that he could better understand what happened and so that the students would learn to take accountability. One of the students was aggravated and resistant, but Reed was able to diffuse the situation with the help of the behavior management specialist. This was not groundbreaking, but Reed spent a good deal of extra time after class and during his planning period to make sure that the student took responsibility and understood why that was so important to him.

All of these events are significant, as they exemplify how Reed’s experiences shaped his identity lens in such a way that he combined his roles as teacher, coach, and mentor into one professional identity. These experiences informed his educational values and what he saw to be important in the classroom. His lens sees opportunities to learn outside of the classroom, viewing the educator as an aggregate of many roles.

Emily's experience, however, shaped her lens in a different way. As an eighth grade teacher, she says that her "biggest goal is to make sure that when [the students] get to high school, they are going to be able to do a really nice job reading their books, and they're gonna be able to write on level with everyone else." In addition, she hopes that her students will find relevance in the content and be able to "challenge [their] own assumptions about certain things through reading a book about it or talking to someone about it."

Her lens focuses far more narrowly on the importance of content mastery for future endeavors and encouraging critical thinking about course materials for later application. This focus on content, too, may draw from the school environment that she saw as a student and in her past work experience. She described herself as a student that was not always well behaved because her classes were often lecture based and "very much like, 'I am going to stand in the front of the room, and I'm gonna talk at you for a full hour, and half of you are going to be sleeping, and we don't really care." Emily described that experience as difficult for her as a student and said that she had no idea what teaching could look like until she was in graduate school studying education, which she called "a completely different way of approaching…the role of the teacher in the classroom."

Emily's extensive experience in lecture based classrooms shaped her identity lens over sixteen years of schooling before she encountered a different approach. With this in mind, though her long held understanding of the teacher role began to change in her master's level coursework, that does not entirely replace the old lens with a new one; it merely blends it. Subsequently, especially as a young teacher, she may still by working to reconcile the competing educational discourses.

This was evident when I compared her survey results to her interview. The survey marked fostering relationships with students, parents, and faculty as three out of her top four most challenging experiences as an educator. However, when I discussed those issues in the interview, she seemed almost unconcerned, saying "[I] feel like it's just easier to be, like, a little bit more detached [from the students] because then they're not so attached to you... like to the point where, it's like, they don't want to go the high school because they're like... they don't want to leave you... You know what I mean?" And regarding parent relationships she said "I'd say it's been fine... I think the only time I've been nervous is if it's a parent where I wasn't sure if they spoke English…" This dichotomy places Emily's conception of teaching into question, and I am not convinced that she is sure of her philosophy yet. A more critical analysis of her definition of teaching and its relationship to her teacher identity may be necessary here.

Concerns about Entering the Field.

The two participants also differed in respect to their preservice teaching concerns. Emily worried most about her instructional efficacy (i.e. her ability to manage time efficiently, plan effective lessons, and reach every student), especially with middle level students. Her student teaching experience and university preparation coursework were catered largely to high school level students, and adapting to the idiosyncratic needs of middle school students was a new idea. However, she did not seem to be very concerned about anything substantial prior to entering the field.

Reed, rather, was concerned with his classroom management skills. His concern stemmed mainly from his experience as a substitute in the school prior to getting hired full time. When I asked him about it, he confessed "it was rough… granted I was a substitute teacher and they were trying to figure out what their limits were, and that's why it was rough, and I knew

that, but I still want to make sure that I set the tone correctly…" He later added that he is not good at being "mean" to the students, so knowing that and factoring in a student body that pushed limits was disquieting for him as a new teacher.

Present

Challenges as a Classroom Teacher.

Emily reported that her worries were assuaged after she taught a class or two, but in Reed's case his concerns were validated, which forced him to change his classroom approach. Regarding classroom management, Reed shared "it has been harder than I expected… significantly harder… I expected it to be difficult, um, but there have been days where I just have no idea what happened. It's like a tornado just went through… I just… I sit down in my chair during my free period and I just go 'I don't know… I don't know what to do at this point'." He also noted that many of his classes have wide ranging ability levels, making it difficult to keep all of the students engaged at the same time. He says:

> "I have kids who are top notch… they can do the homework before I've even taught the lesson, which kills me… I have kids who can't read the word advertising, so the entire context of the problem completely eludes them… I have kids who can't do twelve divided by four… there's kids who understand the context but have no idea, like, how to do basic computations… I have kids who can do computations but can't put it into context… I have kids over here who have no idea what's going on because they can't read the question because they're ESL or they're just really low… along with the kids who are, like, flying… along with the behavior kids…"

Reed found this hard to adapt to, especially considering that both his own education and his student teaching experience took place in a rural school. That feeling of unpreparedness

resonated with both teachers, however, as they both confessed struggling to adapt to their school's workshop teaching model (Maxfield, 1997)—which typically consists of a short mini-lesson, time for collaborative learning, and a wrap-up—and both admitted that their student teaching experience did not adequately prepare them to enter the field.

Valuing Student Teaching

The teachers agreed that the student teaching experience presented a skewed picture of what it was like to be a teacher and even that it was too easy at times. Both completed the requirement at a school in a rural district, which they purport did very little to prepare them for the school environment and student demographic that they currently work with. Reed alleged "I was at Middlebrook and every kid was, like, hands folded… like 'let's get started with class…'" and later added "it was just really easy to… how do I want to word it? Like, in my other student teaching placement… you taught, they were quiet, they learned, end of lesson… here, none of that happens… it's just exhausting. Emily shared similar views, purporting:

> The most challenging thing is, like, there's no way that student teaching can prepare you for the workload that you have because student teaching is a breeze… I only had those twenty kids that I had to remember and grade stuff for and call parents and all that… and I'm lucky that I only have sixty kids… but, you know, even then it's just so different… I'm still adapting to it.

The workshop model was also new to these novice teachers when they began, and each admitted feeling resistant to it at first. Emily eventually agreed that she thought that the method could be effective for the students, but maintained that, given the option, she would choose to teach in another way and Reed even contended that he thought it got in the way of the teaching at times. Toward the end of my interviews, I asked both participants about what advice they would

give to a teacher in training, and, among other things, both warned that student teaching will probably not be enough to prepare teachers for the actual demands of the profession.

My own experience in my teacher preparation program has rendered similar concerns; however, I also believe that, because every classroom is so different, it would be near impossible for any teacher education program to provide adequate exposure in that regard. My program, rather, aims many of their efforts more at providing their teachers with as many educational tools as possible, and regardless of the teacher education program, it may take time for educators to figure out how to best apply those tools in the school where they teach, with the students that they have, and in a way that aligns with their professional goals.

Response to Challenges and Identity growth.

The consensus of the two educators was that the best way to understand what teaching is like is just to do it. Experience is the most important tool here. Yet, they also shared some tools that were and continue to be helpful to them throughout the process: critical friends and being aware of the little things.

Critical friends

The other teachers in the school community served as important resources for both Reed and Emily in both professional and emotional capacities. Academically, both teachers regarded their colleagues as invaluable tools for understanding their students. The school is relatively small, and there are only about 70 students per grade, so it is almost always possible for Emily or Reed to turn to the teachers one grade lower to get advice about how to best work with different students.

Additionally, Reed was able to turn to other people in his life for support, including past teachers and friends in the field. He mentioned lunch plans that he had with an old teacher from

elementary school with whom he was able to discuss things that he was struggling with and bounce ideas around, and Reed's significant other is also in the educational field. In this way, he was able to weave a strong web of support that he could turn to during some of his trials as a new educator.

Emily, too, applauded the availability and helpfulness of the other teachers in the building, but she has a much more unique critical friend. She actually acquired her current position at the school when her friend, Lily, was forced to resign when her husband's business relocated. When she left, she referred Emily for the position, and has been an ally for her since, especially in adapting to the school. For example, she was able to advise her about how to adapt to the school's workshop model. Emily remembers the discussion about Lily's first time using it, when she reacted saying "It's insane. It's so different. I don't know why I am doing this." So, she was able to relate to the issue at hand, but she was also able to tell Emily that the model is effective in the long run. "Halfway through the year, it's going to click, it's going to make sense for you," Lily said, and Emily confirmed that to be true.

Remembering the little things

Emily, also acknowledged the importance of adaptability to little things, like changing the organization of the classroom, to quell seemingly large problems, but Reed made it clear that this was especially important for him as a new teacher. For both, though, some of these events played a truly important role in shaping and changing them. In this way, some of these "little things" were actually quite big things, what Radford (1999) calls critical incidents. Reed, for example articulated several seemingly small events that impacted him like a parent telling him that he is their son's favorite teacher and that a student making him a bracelet in art class, but what happened on September 26th was the most important occurrence; that day was a critical

incident in his identity formation. He told me that he circled that day on his calendar, and explained that he did it to remind himself of the decision he made them. He explained:

> …it's circled on my calendar… because I realized that your attitude is the students' attitude. So, like, I came in on Monday of that week . . . I was just tired… I had planned too late into the night . . . it was a decent lesson, but I was just like… not cheerful… but then, like, my classes were awful, and by the end of the day, I was just like the Grinch teaching math class… and I had left Monday with that attitude and went into Tuesday… it was like the same thing… and then I was like… Wednesday… I went home and was like… I can't keep doing this the entire year… I'm miserable… I hate it… So, I just said, "You know what? I'm changing my attitude starting now…" It's not like the lesson was dramatically different… it's kind of just… changing your tone, changing your facial expression… changing your smile… it's just, like, making them believe that this is like the best day you've ever had… because they're just more prone to have a better experience in math because of it…

He went on to tell me that making that shift changed the rest of the week. It did not solve every problem for Reed. He still had bad days, but they were nothing like they were before, and he was able to start enjoying teaching again.

Future

Goals.

Ultimately, Reed and Emily agree on their long term goal—progress. Both teachers acknowledge that they have areas of practice that they could improve upon, Emily says that is one of the wonderful things about the teaching profession, that it leaves room for that progress and that there is always something that can be improved upon. So while she presents that

teaching "just feels like the type of thing where there's always something to get better at, so you are never done, and you've never reached your goal," Reed agrees that time is less important than the progress itself. He says "as long as I can be honest with myself that I am getting better, then that's all I really look for… I don't really have a timetable in terms of how… like 'perfection needs to be here by the end of 2014,' but… as long as I just keep working at it… that's all I really want."

Debating Teacher Attrition:

"So Hard, But So Worth It"

In the interviews, my final question of the participants garnered very complex responses. I asked both teachers where they saw themselves in five years. Did they still see themselves teaching? Did they believe that it was a lifelong career for them? In the end, both teachers answered that they did see themselves teaching at that point, but neither of them said it with much confidence, and both of the their initial responses were marked by uncertainty. Reed, for one, took a very long time to say anything, but eventually supplied:

> Uh… yeah… umm… yes… um… absolutely. Today was a good day… This whole week has been a great week. If you had asked me last Tuesday, the 25th, I would have said, "I don't think so…" I honestly would have said, "I don't think so…" I was brainstorming a lot like… well if I take four more classes I'll have a math degree, and I can be an actuary and make $80,000 a year, starting pay, and work a 9-5 job, and… and then be done… like, not have to go home and have two hours of lesson plans, and like grading… I just had a taste of it and it, like, blew my mind… but then, this week has been so great… and it's so hard, but it's so worth it… is what it comes down to.

Emily, conversely, answered right away, but she expressed the same internal dilemma, answering:

> Probably… I don't know… I'm honestly not sure… I go back and forth… sometimes I think that it would be amazing [to continue teaching long term] because I would be so much smarter than I am now, and I think that it's the most exhausting job and I can't imagine anyone doing it for so long and not… like, be tired all the time… I guess… but it's also, like, so challenging and fun that I can't imagine that emptiness in my life without it… because there's nothing else in the world that makes me think, or makes me have to adapt to crazy situations in a different way… like I could easily go get… like a cubicle job again and probably do a really awesome job at it, but I think that I'd miss, like, the insanity.

Eventually, both of them seemed fairly sure of their decision to teach. Reed said that he would be happy so long has he had the ability to impact someone's life, and Emily again admitted that teaching was challenging, but that that was part of what made it fun for her; she enjoyed the challenge. Just the same, however, the hesitance is important to note in two new teachers, neither of which have been in the profession much longer than a year, especially considering that most teacher attrition occurs prior to the five year mark. Whether, that hesitance intensifies or recedes over the next few school years would be an intriguing question for future research.

Limitations

I should be considered that the sample size was limited to two participants who work in the same school, so the participant diversity was limited. Furthermore, both teachers in this study currently teach at a charter school in the middle of a densely populated urban area that has a very

high minority student population. I would have liked to gather data from respondents in different school settings as well (e.g. public, private, rural, suburban) for comparative purposes. An additional limitation may be found in that I was acquainted with Reed from coursework at my college prior to the beginning of this study, so I had more background knowledge of him than Emily when collecting and analyzing the data.

Implications

For Me and My Students

My Identity.

Not unlike the critical incidents (Radford, 1999) that Emily and Reed encountered, this study served as that experience for me. When I first started this project, I was scared. I was looking for a scapegoat to fault for the nation's current teacher attrition crisis, and I was looking for someone to blame for the fact that I *had* to be afraid. The question "What if I cannot make it as a teacher either?" was always lingering in my mind. Today, after having the opportunity to study real teachers and work in an authentic school environment, I am *still* scared—but that does not in any way mean that I did not learn anything.

In the first place, I learned a lot about myself. My identity lens and the processes that shaped it are far clearer to me. At first, I did not understand its depth. Being aware of the lens is important, yes, but that alone is not sufficient to truly grasp how and why an identity is shaped. In this way, I learned to move beyond a mere acknowledgement of the lens and to search for the people and experiences that impact(ed) it.

With this, I am also able to better see where my boundaries lie. Even outside of teaching there are going to be ideas and policies that I do not agree with, but if I decide to turn everything into a battle, then that resistance loses significance. Knowing my boundaries helps to pinpoint

which things are worth resisting and also to what extent. I may not know some of these limits until I get my own classroom, as only then will I be able to understand how my identity interacts with the school environment and the needs of my students, but knowing and protecting my currently established boundaries can play an important role in avoiding identity foreclosure when I get to that point.

No matter how well I know myself or how much reflection I do, however, there will be times when I need advice, guidance, or support. For this reason, I plan to maintain and further develop my current group of critical friends. Reed and Emily prove that having these people is a valuable resource, especially to teachers entering the classroom for the first time. These people support, but they can also provide advice, challenge current assumptions, and provide a new perspective based on their own experience in the classroom.

Yet, one of the most important things that I learned is that I am okay with not knowing everything yet—I am not supposed to. No two schools, teachers, or students will be the exactly the same, so I could not know exactly what I should be preparing for if I wanted to. I can only use the tools that I acquired in my education coursework and what I have learned about myself through this project to maintain an awareness of who I am and what my students need, while making informed choices with both in mind.

My Students.

Another fundamental goal in carrying out this research was to use the findings to better prepare myself as a teacher for my students. In doing so, I identify strongly with Reed's idea of "growing a person." He discussed at length his role as a facilitator in the classroom, rather than simply an instructor, and that teachers have responsibilities that extend beyond the content. The

idea of facilitating growth is a powerful one, as teaching, in my view, is a very delicate balance between providing expertise and allowing the students to retain autonomy and develop agency.

In Emily's case, I struggled for some time to understand why she did not seem concerned about becoming a teacher. It bothered me. It was not that I wanted her to be worried, nor was it that I wanted her to be like me (though I thought it might have been for a time). I could not figure it out, so, I discussed my confusion with one of my critical friends at work, and it clicked. Through my lens and in the way that I view teaching, if you do not have any concerns about your practice, then you may not be reflecting on it critically enough.

Concerns, as I now understand them, may not be entirely bad, in that they exist because of a perceived a gap between who we are and who we need to be. Concerns, then, are important. If one of my duties as an educator is to be conscious of that gap between my practice and the needs of my students—or my practice and my identity, for that matter—then the concerns are not only relevant, but necessary. My concerns are what led me to this self-study, which I regard as one of the most important steps that I could have taken toward entering the field of education.

Even in writing this paper I have found implications for my students. This report has, undoubtedly, been one of the most difficult academic experiences that I have faced to date. There were so many times in the process of writing this that I needed to walk away because I was so frustrated. There was so much that I wanted to say, and I just could not get it to make sense. With that in mind, I think I can better relate to my students now. It was not that I did not understand that writing would be hard for some students, but now I can actually relate to the emotions and the process, which may help me to be a sensitive practitioner.

For the Field

The implications for the field of education holistically are not that different. Each teacher needs to be able to own and understand their identity, while creating realistic boundaries with the students in mind, and building a support group of critical friends to help along the way. The implications, however, apply to both teachers in training and institutions of higher learning

The student teaching process, for example, may not always reflect what new teachers will see in the field. Both participants in this study felt that their time spent student teaching did not adequately prepare them for the workload they currently face or, at times, the differences from one school to another. Based on my experience in my program, a two pronged approach may be helpful. Reed and Emily both suggest that a more existential, experience-based approach to preservice teacher preparation may be beneficial because experience has been extremely important to their development as educators. As a secondary education major myself, I get less practicum experience than the elementary educators at my school, and I, too, believe that I would benefit from having more authentic classroom experience in the program to base my practice on.

At the same time, however, preservice teachers also need to take a critical approach to what they are learning. The knowledge and the skills that they acquire are only useful if the individual understands how they apply to teacher that they are becoming. For that reason, I feel that a project such as this, a deep, critical, and conscious exploration of self, would be invaluable for novice educators. I have encountered reflective, teacher identity related assignments in a few of my classes, but the requirements could be fulfilled without having to dig as deeply as I feel is necessary to truly grasp what identity is, how it is shaped, and why it is so important. Formative assessment is not only reserved for students; in order to see our own learning, we need to

constantly assess ourselves. Self-study trains identity-conscious educators and helps them to grow into true lifelong learners.

The End of the Beginning

Instead of using this space to mark the end of my research project, I would rather do just the opposite. Everything that I learned from the experience that was this study taught me that everything is connected; every experience shapes the identity lens and impacts the person. Researching identity, as this study does, is the ultimate iterative process—it does not end. Accordingly, concluding this work in the traditional sense would send a misleading and untrue message that my work is finished. This is only the end of my beginning. My hope, however, is that this research will also mark a beginning for other potential teachers, who may realize the value—and perhaps necessity—of self-study to developing educators.

APPENDIX A

EMAIL SAMPLE:

Dear (*participant's name*),

My name is Nicholas Bernardo and I am an undergraduate student of education at Rhode Island College. I am currently doing an honors research study regarding the development of professional identity among new educators. Subsequently, I am contacting you to see if you would be willing to be a participant in the study. Participation would ask you to complete two surveys, which will take no longer than 15 minutes each, partake in one interview, which will take no longer than 1 hour, and permit me to observe up to five of your class periods. Involvement is completely voluntary and is in no way required by your employer. Additionally, your identity will remain confidential both during my data collection and after the study has been completed. If you are interested, feel free to contact me at this address—nbernardo_7177@email.ric.edu.

Thank you and I hope to hear from you soon,

- Nicholas

APPENDIX B

PROFESSIONAL VALUES SURVEY

ID Number:	
Age:	
Gender:	
# of Years Teaching:	Content Area:

INSTUCTIONS: For each statement below, consider how important you think the item is for the students in your classroom. For each category, rank the statements from 1 (most important) to 4 (least important).

Rank #	**Category: Academic Goals**
	Students should learn the terms and facts of the discipline
	Students should make connections between schoolwork and the real world
	Students should make connections between disciplines
	Students should develop a strong interest in the discipline

Rank #	**Category: Developmental Goals**
	Students should uncover what they value in their lives
	Students should develop a lifelong love of learning
	Students should develop the ability to think independently
	Students should develop strong communication/interpersonal skills

Rank #	**Category: Community Goals**
	Students should develop an openness to new ideas
	Students should develop an understanding of different cultures
	Students should commit to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens
	Students should develop an informed concern about contemporary social issues

Rank #	**Category: Assessment Goals**
	Students should be able to perform well on high stakes assessments
	Students should be able to perform well in the workforce
	Students should be able to meet state and federal standards in the discipline
	Students should become better prepared for college level academic demands

Are there important objectives that are not listed above? Comment here:

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APPENDIX C

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES SURVEY

ID Number:	
Age:	
Gender:	
# of Years Teaching:	Content Area:

INSTUCTIONS: For each question below, place a checkmark next to the tasks that have been challenging to you as a new educator (check **UP TO FOUR**).

b	**Relationships**
	Fostering strong student/teacher relationships
	Fostering strong parent/teacher relationships
	Fostering strong relationships with coworkers
	Fostering strong relationships with administration

b	**Administration Requirements**
	Preparing for standardized tests
	Meeting the expectations of school administrators
	Meeting curriculum requirements
	Budget cuts

b	**Classroom**
	Effective lesson planning
	Classroom assessments
	Motivating students
	Meeting the needs of every student in the classroom
	Classroom management
	Time management

b	**Other**
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	_

Additional Challenges:

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APPENDIX D
PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

ID Number:	
Age:	
Gender:	
# of Years Teaching:	Content Area:

PRESERVICE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

1. Why did you want to become a teacher?
2. As a student, what characteristics did you admire in your teachers?
3. As a student, were there any specific experiences that influenced the teacher that you are/would like to become? Explain.

CONCERNS

4. What were you most afraid of before you took your first teaching job? Why did that scare you?

   Follow up (if yes): Have any of those fears been affirmed or denied?
5. What concerns you now as a practicing teacher? What do you do on a daily basis to deal with those concerns?
6. What are your professional goals? Are you currently progressing toward these goals?

TEACHING EXPERIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT

7. As a new educator, were you assigned a mentor? What was helpful about the mentor? What did not help? Why/why not?
8. As a new educator, is/was there anything that was challenging to adapt to? Was anything easier than expected? Explain.
9. What characteristics do you look for in a principal? Why?
10. Who is the best principal you have worked with? Why?
11. Is there anything from your teaching experiences that you are particularly proud of?

REFLECTION

12. What do you know now that you wish you had known on your first day of teaching? Why?
13. What advice would you give a student preparing to become an educator?

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